



# The Problem of Cherry Laurel

A reference guide to one of Ireland's most dire threats to ecological restoration.

Gaelic Woodland Project (Reg. Charity n. 20206178)



*The evergreen, waxy leaves of Cherry Laurel weave an impenetrable dark thicket that outcompetes all other plant growth.*

At the end of the last Ice Age, around 80% of Ireland was forested. In the following centuries, this vast forest was gradually cut down. Today, forest cover in Ireland is only 11%, but 60% of it is non-native conifer plantations. Only between **1% and 2% of forest cover is native woodland.**

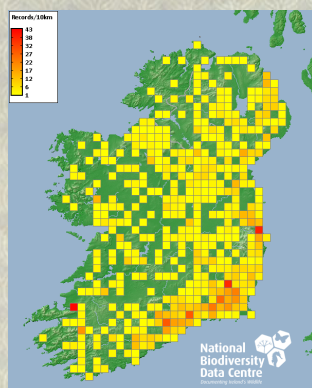
The three main pressures on those native woodlands are:

- o Excessive Grazing and Browsing
- o Fragmentation and Undermanagement
- o Invasive Non-Native Species.

Cherry Laurel (*Prunus Lauroceracus*) is one of those **non-native and highly invasive species**. It is the second most common non-native shrub in Irish woodlands, and it remains **a popular hedge in gardens** throughout Ireland.

In Elizabethan times, it was introduced to Ireland from the shores of the Black Sea as an ornamental and hedging plant for landscape gardening in the Big Estates, but it has since escaped into the wild. Its branches will grow easily upwards of 8 metres. Its seeds love rich woodland soil, and in its ruthless drive to survive, **even a little branch left on the forest floor can regrow and take on roots.**

This evergreen plant has **toxic leaves that contain cyanide**, making it unpalatable to herbivores. It thrives in the nutrient-rich woodland soils, dominating the habitat by overshadowing other plants and preventing their growth. Cherry Laurel **creates dark, sterile environments** that inhibit the regeneration of native species and limits biodiversity.



Distribution map as of February 2026 by the National Biodiversity Data Centre.





# An environmental contradiction

Although Cherry Laurel is recognised as highly invasive by Ireland's environmental agencies, it **has still not been designated as an invasive species in law**, while infestations are present in every county. Without that legal designation, it remains unregulated, **sold freely in garden centres, supermarkets, and nurseries** nationwide without any labels warning consumers about how invasive it is.

The NPWS and Coillte continue to **conduct isolated, expensive removal efforts** which are insufficient to tackle the scope of the island-wide invasions. This places a significant economic burden on Ireland. While the true cost is difficult to quantify, it is estimated to run into the tens of millions of euro annually, with costs projected to escalate dramatically if left unmanaged.

Under EU Regulation 1143/2014 on Invasive Alien Species, transposed into Irish law through the European Union (Invasive Alien Species) Regulations 2024, **the State is obligated to take preventive and management measures** to limit the spread and impact of invasive species. This includes listing harmful species of national concern and restricting their sale, propagation, and release. The continued unregulated sale and spread of Cherry Laurel, despite its recognised ecological harm, runs counter to these legal obligations and national commitments, and **undermines public trust** in Ireland's environmental governance.



*Its use as hedging continually increases this problem - its seeds can be spread by birds; and it can take root virtually anywhere.*



*Infestations become lifeless, impassable barriers where sunlight doesn't reach the forest floor, impeding the growth of herbaceous layers and other species, effectively halting biodiversity.*

## The Big Insight: turn it into biofuel

Since July 2022, the Gaelic Woodland Project has been developing a community-based approach to its removal which **converts it into a source of biofuel**. This is a non-mechanised methodology that communities all around the country can use to take on their local infestations and harvest free firewood while simultaneously **saving their local woodlands**.

Working alongside our volunteers, we found that Cherry Laurel is rather easy to clear without power tools; while its designation as a "shrub" means that there is no felling license required to remove it. This is a call for **public action** in the absence of Government-led solutions.



*Logs of Cherry Laurel harvested by volunteers of the Gaelic Woodland Project before collection to store and dry.*



# Spreading awareness and advocacy

Despite its widespread ecological harm, including the displacement of native flora, alteration of soil chemistry, and suppression of biodiversity, the availability and sale of Cherry Laurel remains unaddressed. This is due not to scientific uncertainty or regulatory complexity, but rather to **a continued failure to apply legal mechanisms** already available under EU and Irish law.

Since 2024, we have led an **advocacy campaign for proper legislation** and the inclusion of Cherry Laurel into the **List of National Concern**. Our efforts resulted in the publication of two reports outlining this issue, which has now been raised at the Dáil by different TDs. In the **“Protecting Woodlands”** section of our website, you can find all the relevant information about this campaign and our ongoing fight calling for Government action.

If you care about the long-term survival of native Irish woodlands, please **help us spread awareness** by contacting your local TD, sending this document to your local garden centre and telling others about it. If you're a garden shop owner, consider halting the sale of Cherry Laurel. If you've planted Cherry Laurel, consider exchanging it for a native species such as willow or hawthorn.

You can also join our Volunteer work-days, and **consider making a donation** to our volunteering charity to support our campaign.

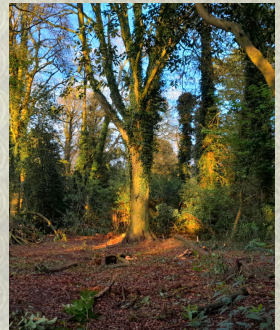
Irish ecology has been through a lot, and as a country we are still learning how to look after the unique ecosystem we've been entrusted with. But one thing is clear: **our native woodlands don't stand a chance unless we stop Cherry Laurel usage and spreading.**



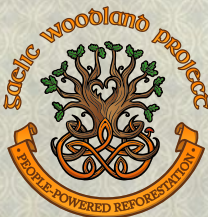
*Volunteers at work during our seasonal work days in Co. Carlow.*



*The harvest of Cherry Laurel logs after our 2025 season.*



*After clearing an infestation, light returns again to the forest floor.*



We thank you for taking the time to read this document. If you've questions, ideas, suggestions, feedback or comments, we'd love to hear them!

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